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ABSTRACT

The message of current popular television shows in which the hero is, or appears to be, a dumb clod (e.g., Archie Bunker, Fred Sanford, Columbo, and Barnaby Jones), apparently is that corruption may be equated with articulation, wealth, and education, while virtue may be equated with poverty and, often, illiteracy. Unfortunately, the effect of this message upon undiscerning college students may be immediate and far-reaching in its implication that the speaking and writing of literate English is an elitist and undesirable quality and that to be versed in literature is to wear a red "A" on the bosom. In contrast, the novels taught in a college literature course approximate life more nearly than do clod-hero television shows, and a college composition course imparts more practical knowledge than does Columbo or any other clod hero. (JM)

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THE GAME TV PLAYS: OR, WHY AN ENGLISH TEACHER CAME TO HATE BARNABY JONES

Patrick W. Shaw

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While the test pattern is yet on, let me say that I intend to embroil myself in no debate about the effects of TV on children. I am not qualified for that, and can only cringe when I pass through the family room and see my ~~four~~ five-year old on her belly and enthralled by Sesame Street with its slang, jargon, and unintentional non sequiturs. So what if she learns to count backwards and that little people do not stand under large birds. I pacify myself by hoping that the knowledge will do her no lasting harm and that it certainly is not so bad as having some pedant play games with her head by telling her never to split an infinitive or end on a preposition.

In any case, I reiterate that I do not want to get messed up in any argument about television and little kids. What I do wish to comment on is the effect that TV has on big kids, those who come to my college classes with writer's guide in hand but with video in the head--and who, I fear, are not so discerning as the Sesame Street legions. They've had their astuteness hammered dull by many factors, not the least of which is a game played by television moguls.

In most popular television shows there is a hero and there is a fall guy. This hero is not the typical masculine tough guy, though Matt Dillon still runs around (or re-runs actually) as the middle-aged simulacrum, and Joe Cannon tries grossly to mimic the old stereotypes. The hero I mean is the dumb clod hero--Archie Bunker, Fred Sanford, Columbo, Barnaby Jones. To one degree or

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another they are all devious and dedicated--dedicated to the humiliation of eradication of all who are not devious.

For instance, there's Barnaby Jones, ace detective and topnotch clod. "It's sure purty here," he intones, eyeing the well appointed hacienda of a suave rich man he's about to crucify. "Whoooeee!" Although Jones himself must be wealthy, what with all the rewards and fees he gets for his infallibility, and although he dresses better than most of his rich antagonists, he remains a hopeless boob, shambling about and muttering in his carryover Beverly Hillbilly twang. A list of the villains he has done in of late includes a writer, a sophisticated bank president, an articulate owner of a basketball team, a college prof, a young lawyer, and any number of other educated successful people. In contrast Jones is presented as the wise fatherly pragmatist, lovable, kind, and with an honesty unmatched since George Washington. In fact Jones is a doddering boor.

Pursuing Jones' same formula is Columbo, the quintessential clod. All his foils too are rich, educated, articulate--and hopelessly corrupt. Columbo appeals, the TV critics tell us, to the common man, who loves to see the wealthy folks get their comeuppance. Maybe so, but Columbo is even more of a stumblebum hero than Jones, a muttering semiliterate who scatters cigar ashes over the grammatical and social landscape. Like most of the other clod heroes, Columbo doesn't imbibe or show any interest in females, whereas his antagonists are forever doing both. He does, however, constantly wear a battered raincoat--and I am suspicious of that. I think that behind Columbo's Cro-Magnon virtue lurks a pervert, and I harbor visions of Columbo's going out and exposing himself to passing damsels once he has incarcerated the rich and the articulate. "Want to see a cigar, honey?" he says to the unsuspecting. Then, flash!

I know that the vision is unfounded. Such suggestive subtlety would never cross the mind of the TV scriptwriter nor the desk of Miss Goodbody. I know too that such clod heroes are nothing new. Their prototypes go back to

Huck Finn and beyond. But the effect of the TV variety clod is more immediate and far-reaching than Huck or any of his kind. And, besides, Huck didn't limit his scorn just to the rich and literate. Twain had a fair share of vitriol for everybody. But Columbo and Jones and their ilk do limit themselves to a condemnation of certain types of individuals. Such shows would have us believe that they are attacking only the idle rich, because as Fitzgerald said, the rich are very different from you and me, and we like to see them done in. Maybe such a defense is in part true. But more than excoriating the rich, the clod hero shows attack the educated, the sophisticated, those who know the difference between purty and beautiful, and those who have the smarts and ambition to stay off the welfare rolls. The fact that such people may be wealthy is of secondary concern.

A good example of what I mean appeared in the first episode of a 1974 version of the clod hero. This addition to the poverty-and-ignorance-are-virtues syndrome was called The Manhunter, a fiasco which fortunately was short-lived. The hero is a blond, ex-marine, cleancut All-American boy. On the surface much unlike Columbo, this hero is nonetheless from the same mold. He has carried his GI killer instincts back to a Depression farm in the mid-West, where his mother, father, sister, and faithful dog are starving because the bank and the rich won't subsidize them anymore. These folks are unschooled and dirt poor--and that is their saving grace.

It makes no difference that the father is a cantankerous coot who kicks and curses malfunctioning tractors or that Sis demonstrates somewhat more than sibling affection for her naive brother. (He's been to China and all over but remains as pure as Adam before the snake.) Such shortcomings are to be ignored, for the entire clan is uneducated and moneyless, and that compensates for any evil. Anyhow, manhunter Dave (remember David and Goliath of Bible fame) is forced into private eyeing when bank robbers kill his dog and the wife of his (Dave's not the dog's) best friend. Dave never clarifies which

death he laments most, but clearly he does not worry one iota that the bank has been ripped off.

So Dave sets out on the first of his gangbusting episodes. And who would have guessed that the leader of the robbers is a gentle man who loves horses and dogs and his only remaining sister and who is soft-spoken and articulate? Sure, he robs a bank or two; but the script doesn't present that as being his great fault. His fatal flaw is that he is gentle and loves horses and dogs and his lone sister and is articulate. He even reads hard-back books. He is thus portrayed as being crazy as a stallion in heat and well deserving of having his head perforated by the aforementioned David. And, I might add, the sub-villain of the show is a reporter who apparently makes a fairly good living writing the king's English and who is presented as a troublesome prig because he wants to report the doings of a psycho-hero who has sublimated his drives into pistols and long rifles.

The logic seemingly followed by the clod hero script writers is to equate articulation, wealth, and education with corruption. It's an easy and simpleminded association, stemming from the robber barons and the Biblical adages about money being the root of all evil and a rich man's going to heaven being like a camel squeezing through a needle's eye. And of course it's been more or less instilled in the American psyche. Fitzgerald's Buchanans are about the foulest bunch a poor boy would ever hope to trust his virtue to; and even Nelson Rockefeller--trying no doubt to don the image of Honest Abe Lincoln--attempts to pass off his 160 million as a mere pittance which in no way keeps him from being just a good ol' boy. And speaking of politicians, you can look to Adlai Stevenson and Eugene McCarthy to see what the American electorate feels about men who read books, write poetry and prose, and who display IQ's higher than the humidity count.

The point is that the most prevalent game show on TV is the clod hero show--that show in which the scriptwriters and producers would have us believe

that virtue is the exclusive property of the poor, that because they own nothing else the poverty stricken have monopolized honesty, purity, and love. (Even Sesame Street has no one who could pay his own room rent, but I promised not to get involved in that game.) I resent that concept, not because I am rich but because I am poor. And I have as much right to corruption as Rockefeller or Onassis or Ted Kennedy or Hugh Hefner--maybe even as much right as ~~Howard Hughes~~ Jimmy Carter. Evil is a god-given right, and I do not want money to take that right away from me. I don't think I should be forced to get and strive just to enjoy the fruits of corruption. Adam guaranteed me the right with a mere apple.

But that, after all, is beside the point. What really bothers me about the shows is that they imply that the speaking (and by extension the writing) of literate English is an elitist and therefore undesirable quality, that to be versed in literature is a red "A" upon the bosom, and that to be articulate is a symptom of chronic sexual immorality and general decadence.

Those of us who "teach English" know already the difficulty involved in convincing the students of the worth of our courses--particularly the freshman-sophomore courses. Most of the students in these courses are there because the university rightfully feels that they need to be there. But if the students had the choice, the majority would desert us faster than Barnaby Jones can drop a corny aphorism. We can tell them that even in these liberal times they will still be judged by the way they speak and write, that literature can teach them moral truths, and that sooner or later--no matter what their profession--they will have to commit themselves to their native tongue. Maybe we have to play our own pedagogical games to make the students accept these truisms; and maybe the games work and maybe they don't. But in any event the students go home or back to the dorm, and when they should be reading our assignments or writing our essays, they watch television.

And there before them, with all the blessings of Hollywood, roll-on deo-

dorants, and General Motors, is Jones or Columbo or Sandford or Bunker or big Dave--the clod heroes, winning again and bringing grief to those who speak well and who inhabit homes with workable indoor plumbing. I have no doubts that the influence of such video heroes is more subconscious than conscious, but therein lies their danger. The student does not with awareness emulate Columbo or his kind, certainly not as my own generation aped James Dean or Elvis Presley. But the student cannot help but assimilate much of what he sees on the tube, and the hero that he sees most often is the undereducated boob, who through luck and the scriptwriter's manipulations always comes out the winner.

Such shows are of course totally removed from reality. But the lower division student has not yet regained the subtlety of thought required to turn his willing suspension of disbelief on and off. He actually comes to believe that ignorance is admirable and that somehow, with little effort of his own, he will himself become a kind of folk hero. He does not see the paradox or irony in the fact that the clod heroes are sponsored by Buick and Ban and J. C. Penney's ten-dollar shirts, and that some fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year man behind the scenes is trying to sell him a bill of goods, quite literally. Instead the student is imbued with the idea, seldom articulated, that he can hick his way through life. He forgets--or has never known --that there is in his life no scriptwriter to devise the happy ending and that ignorance has an 18% service charge. He doesn't learn until it is too late that those villainous articulate rich people are in fact the ones who run the country and that in real life there is no shambling mumbling clod that will stumble in and save the day for the ignorant and unmotivated. The appropriate game metaphor here is chess, with the pawns being sacrificed to the gilded queen of high finance.

What I am trying to say is that even though the novels which I teach may not present a total picture of "real" life, they come a lot closer than the

clod hero shows. And the composition courses I teach can give a lot more practical knowledge than the courses in perverted ethics which Columbo and his kind impart. Catch-22 or Invisible Man or One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, with all their aberrations, tell it more nearly like it is than any of the clod hero shows. And, alas, this is ultimately what really scares me: the boys behind the clod heroes know precisely what they are doing. They lull the viewer into a false sense of security so that when the hard sell comes he cannot resist it. Fed so long on the tasteless pablum of distorted, romantic foideroy, the viewer becomes immune to reality itself.

On the surface, poverty and ignorance and illiteracy are made virtues. But the folks at General Motors know that what is best for GM really is best for America--and they make sure that the unwashed masses never have the smarts to ask why that's true or if it is. "We're selling you baseball, hot-dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet America," says GM, and "Amen" echoes Texaco, Exxon, Shell, and Mobil. "So watch ol' Barnaby and Columbo and Archie while we rob you, both literally and morally."

So I return home in the evening, having played whatever games I needed to play to counteract such ethics, and I meander through the family room. I see my small daughter engrossed in Sesame Street--on a TV set, by the way, which was not given to me--and for the moment I rest secure. I know that she is astute enough to see the pretend quality of the happy folks and puppets living with love and equanimity in the midst of direst poverty. Her own roof doesn't leak, there are no garbage cans outside her door, and her friends don't inhabit dump grounds. I'm fairly certain that she knows, without knowing that she knows, that she is able to enjoy such a ~~clod~~ clod-cuckoo land because she herself views it from the comfort of a home made possible by parents who read hardback books and who work hard. Or at least I play a game with myself and think that she knows this.

So I rest secure for the moment. But I cannot help but ponder what will

happen as she gets older and has her senses bombarded by the clod hero shows and their spin-offs. I like to think that my own influence over her will be stronger than theirs--but what chance does a dumb English teacher really have against General Motors and a big bird stupid as oatmeal?

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